



AUNE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

'Conserving the Devonshire Avon from source to sea'

NEWSLETTER - NOVEMBER 2008

Dear ACA member

This is my third Newsletter of 2008. If you know of members who do not receive e-mail, please help by passing the information on.

CALL FOR NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Sadly, we are losing 3 highly valued committee members - Pat Cassidy, Maya Plass and Mike Garton-Sprenger. For family- or work-related reasons they no longer are able to find the time they believe the committee deserves and have decided to resign although their involvement with the ACA will continue. Maya, for example, has agreed to continue to run ACA's collaboration on Cockleridge with the Marine Conservation Society's 'Adoptabeach' scheme. I'd like to thank them all on your behalf for their contributions over the past couple of years.

As a direct result of these vacancies, we are seeking new committee members who might be able to help out in various ways. All committee members are involved in formulating ACA policy and liaising with other stakeholders about the river but there are also opportunities to help with the organisation of our finances and with social events such as our occasional lectures, regular estuary clean-ups and reunions. We hold several committee meetings each year in addition to the AGM. Ideally, you should have easy access to a computer. It goes without saying that your personal objectives as a new committee member should be aligned with those of the ACA. If this all seems a bit formal; the idea is to enjoy yourself whilst helping the local environment! **If you would like to become involved in helping to run our charity or would like to find out more about what it involves, please contact me.**

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At a recent committee meeting there was some debate about the different local perceptions of the ACA. Apparently, our efforts are not always viewed in a flattering way. Some 'locals' think the ACA and its committee consist merely of a bunch of self-serving individuals; a view that I strongly resent! Therefore, I'd like to offer a few personal words of clarification and to review some recent examples of what we are doing. I hope all ACA members will help to disseminate this information.

Our image is very important if we are to have any influence on local environmental events. Firstly, I don't think it unreasonable to expect all ACA members to act with what might be called 'environmental integrity' both in their words and in their actions although it must be obvious that as an organisation we cannot control the behaviour of individual members. Secondly, I am not interested in chairing a supine organisation that is no more than an agreeable lunch club. Personally, I have no qualms about vigorously promoting our charitable objectives - the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment of the Avon

and its estuary, together with advancing the education of the public in these areas. However, the circumstances of other interest groups will influence their views about what an environmental conservation charity should be doing and, sometimes, about the methodology involved. As an organisation, we need to strive towards our objectives in the most effective ways. Unfortunately, we might not always get the message perfectly delivered to all classes of recipient, in some cases ruffling a few feathers that have been left undisturbed for quite a long time. Although this might dent our image with some factions, I hope that our intentions will always be seen as being honourable and focussed only on the greater wellbeing of the environment. I doubt whether our local environment ever has been under such great threat of disruption and change due to the ever increasing pressures of over-population, climatic variation and shortage of environmental management resources. This threat means we all need to consider and perhaps challenge our own actions and habits in our use of the river and estuary; this can be an uphill task for everybody! Persuasion, facilitation and education are the ACA's main tools but unfortunately these are sometimes ineffective. Depending on the circumstances, we may also call upon the appropriate external agency for action although they do not always have our own focus on the river or adequate resources and that may make them seem complacent: in practice, this means we have to try even harder. I hope all our members will agree that lobbying on behalf of the local environment should be one of the ACA's premier activities if we truly value and wish to conserve what we have around us.

Some recent examples of the ACA's efforts and involvement in local environmental issues and of qualified successes, of which many members might be unaware, should help to illustrate our purpose and why I so strongly resent disparaging comment. The examples include:

1. Sewage overflow at Aveton Gifford (AG). This overflow threatens the water quality of the Avon and all that entails for wildlife and recreation on the river. The ACA has supported the actions of AG Parish Council and local residents both in lobbying Gary Streeter MP and in participating in an on-site meeting with representatives of South West Water (SWW), SHDC Environmental Health Dept., the Environment Agency (EA) and SHDC's engineering contractors (May Gurney). There are obvious deficiencies in the sewage system at AG which all parties now seem committed to correcting. Gary Streeter has asked to be kept informed of developments.
2. Mooring management at Aveton Gifford. The absence of any management of the moorings at AG threatens both the physical and natural environment of the river. The ACA has been in discussion with the Duchy of Cornwall's Land Steward and other parties to promote more active management of the moorings. Negotiations are still progressing but we hope that a satisfactory resolution is now not far away. The 'Gillaroo' is still moored at AG despite our best efforts and a DoC warning of legal action. I am told that an eventual move to Saltash (presumably to a properly equipped boat yard) is now planned by the owner, to conduct the renovation he originally intended to take place on our river.
3. 'Cherish the Avon' and 'A Conservationist's Fishing Guide'. In 2008 we published and distributed these two leaflets locally. The first offers advice about good environmental practice around the river for residents and holidaymakers; the second attempts to clarify the restrictions and byelaws on fishing which are poorly known, misunderstood or are widely ignored. Both leaflets are available on our website.

4. Tree-felling in the Avon valley.



Adjacent areas on the old railway bed above Loddiswell (05 Nov 08); one felled, one not.

The wooded valley of the Avon is one of the delights of the South Hams; it forms the 'backbone' of the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' and the trees are a valuable asset for many reasons (tourism, wildlife haven, prevention of soil erosion, etc.). Two incidents of large scale tree-felling have been brought to my attention by ACA members within the last couple of months. We can do little about these operations as an organisation beyond referring the details to both the AONB Unit and to the EA. Unfortunately, it seems these agencies are also unable to take any preventative action beyond asking the ACA to check whether the individuals concerned have a Forestry Commission tree-felling licence – a less than satisfactory outcome! It sometimes seems these salaried bureaucrats from different agencies who are supposed to be guardians of our environment have a policy of not communicating with each other at the pragmatic level where it really might make a difference.

5. Trout Farm below Avon Mill. This development threatens both river water quality and wildlife. The resurrection of the old trout farm near Loddiswell raised no objections from SHDC's planners because no change of use was perceived to be involved (despite the planned, additional development of a packing and merchandising facility). The project is being funded by a Marine and Fisheries Agency grant for around £400,000 despite the fact that it lies on the river's flood plain (we have photographs, supplied by the Avon Fishing Association, showing flooding of the site when the Avon was in spate) and, therefore, could lead to an environmental disaster if the farmed fish escape. We have passed these photographs to both the EA and to SHDC's planners (via the Tidal Waters staff of the EA) in the hope that inter-agency communications can be improved, that the required land drainage certificate will not be issued, and that development might be halted. Worryingly, the EA has recently been criticised for inaction elsewhere in the UK for lack of action over fish farms which, according to a DEFRA-funded report, led almost invariably to the quality of the water below fish farms being poor; the water contained testosterone, steroids, ammonia and several other substances harmful to fish.
6. England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative (CSFI). You may remember that the ACA part-funded the inclusion of the Avon in the original CSFI scheme (managed by the local AONB unit), to improve river water quality by reducing agricultural run-off. In the first phase, the Avon was only an 'associate' catchment but after the success of our

collaborative participation, which was acclaimed as an excellent example of how the scheme could work, we are delighted to confirm that, in the second phase, the Avon has been included in the 'primary' catchment area covering several local South Devon rivers. This 'promotion' to primary catchment status should mean that further resources will be made available to help our local farmers improve soil and water management to the benefit of the environment.

7. The increasing practice of spreading sewage sludge on farms within the Avon's catchment area is a growing concern because of the danger of water pollution and public nuisance. Several weeks ago, I was alerted by an ACA member to the problems of smell and potential pollution of Torr Brook (which feeds into the Avon) at several sludge piles near Woodleigh. As a direct result of ACA involvement, a principal scientist from SWW has been invited to give sludge management an 'airing' at the next **Avon Estuary Forum on 18th November at 1900 in Thurlestone Parish Hall**. This will provide the chance for anybody to ask questions about sludge-spreading policy and practice.
8. As reported in the local press, the ACA successfully participated in the Marine Conservation Society's 'Adoptabeach' scheme, in which we have 'adopted' Cockleridge because it is the primary deposition site for much of the rubbish that litters the river. Our involvement in this rubbish monitoring and recording scheme will continue with Maya's help and she will need plenty of volunteer collectors and counters. **The next clean-up will be on Saturday 3rd January**. The precise timing will be dependent upon the tides; details to be confirmed.
9. Signage on the Tidal Road is totally inadequate to protect pedestrians (wildlife watchers, walkers, etc.), vehicle users and the road itself. Like it or loathe it, this treacherous road has become an important part of the physical environment of the tidal part of the river. We are lobbying the Highways Dept. of DCC for more comprehensive hazard warning signs and for the road to be removed from satellite navigation systems.

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OTHER ISSUES OF INTEREST

The award scheme that we launched last year to commemorate the late John Crawford's contribution to the ACA over many years has not, so far, been a resounding success. We had hoped that more schools, colleges and individuals would apply for modest grants to fund studies on the river. To date, we have received (and supported) only one application from Plymouth University as reported in my last newsletter. As a result, the Committee has decided in addition to erect a simple, commemorative, wooden bench on the public footpath in Stiddicombe Wood with the kind permission of the Directors of the Evans Estate and in consultation with John's family. We are commissioning a suitable bench made from local wood at the moment and hope to be able to make a further announcement on progress very soon. Interested members will be invited to a simple ceremony to mark the occasion.

Our 'Full Moon BBQ and Flotilla' on Cockleridge on 14th September was enjoyed by all but the homeward journey upriver - under cloudy skies which obscured the moon - was quite eventful, involving a capsized kayak and some tricky mooring by torchlight. The frightening

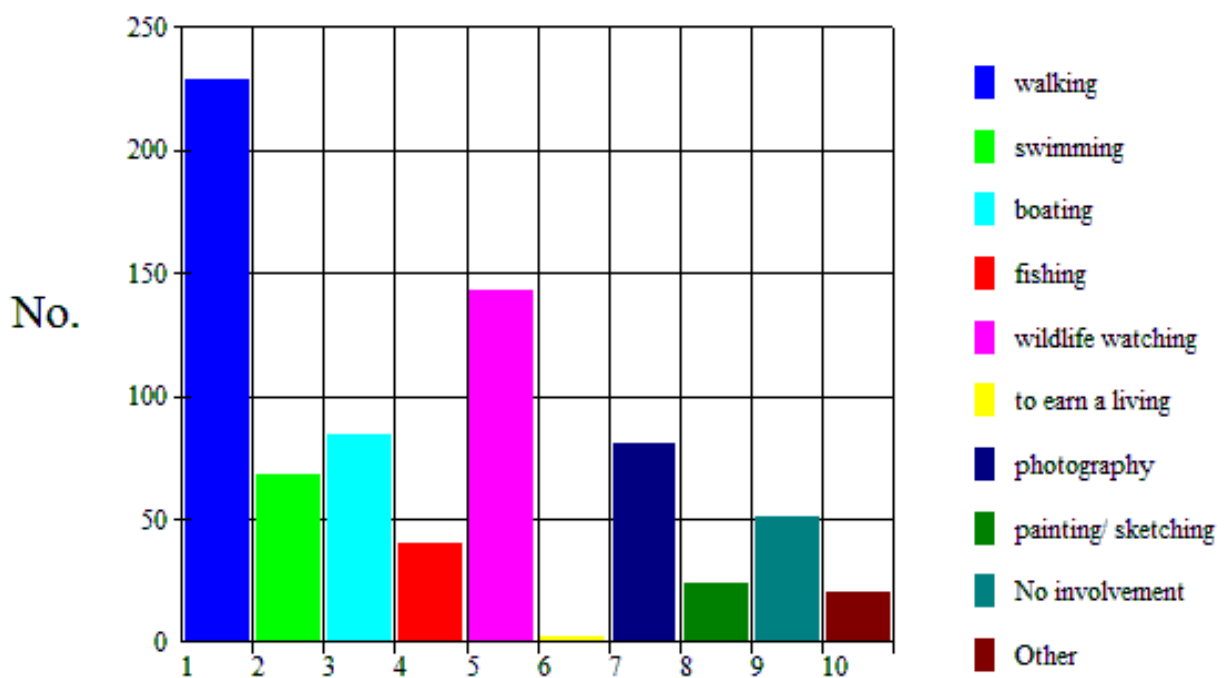
experience endured by some participants emphasised the importance of careful planning and caution in all boating matters; a few of us learned some important lessons, I think!

We have decided to move our August lectures to October following feedback from members that mid-summer is not the best time for many of them to attend. Frankly, we have not managed to attract a large audience of holiday makers so we might as well suit our own convenience. We are planning the October 2009 talks now; if you have any ideas for suitable topics, please let us know.

I am hoping to arrange a pre-Christmas reunion for interested members and their guests; possibly at the 'Oyster Shack', Bigbury – an old haunt and a popular venue with many members; it was the location for John Crawford's original 'Oysterfests'. Details are being arranged at present so keep your eyes on our website (www.aca.aveton-gifford.co.uk) for the latest information.

If you have ever wondered what use local people make of the river, you might be interested in the results of a recent survey carried out in the parish of Bigbury. 314 people responded to the question 'How do you make use of the River Avon?' to produce the data in the bar chart below. If similar objective analyses could be conducted for other parishes bordering the river, the results might be of use in future revisions of both the AONB Management Plan and the Avon Estuary Management Plan; for example, in advancing the argument for the placement of information boards at strategic locations for walkers and wildlife watchers or in protecting the river as a recreational asset – just an idea!

How do you make use of the River Avon?



Finally, this is the fish migration season when illegal netting operations around the river mouth tend to increase and decimate the river's fish population. If you see any suspicious activities on the water, especially at night on spring tides, please telephone either Devon Sea Fisheries (DSF) on 01803 854648 or the Environment Agency on their free hotline - 0800 807060. By the way, DSF deals with Bass, the EA with migrating Salmon and Sea Trout!

With best wishes

Stuart Watts (Chairman)

PS you are welcome to contact me via our website at www.aca.aveton-gifford.co.uk , by e-mail at sdmw2@btopenworld.com or by phone on 01548 810373.